

HEALTH

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C6 Life

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TCM: coughs

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Coughs are the single most common complaint treated by traditional Chinese medicine. Coughing is a natural response to irritants in the throat and airways. When an irritant stimulates the nerves in the respiratory tract, the brain sends signals to the muscles in the abdomen and diaphragm which give a strong push to air in the lungs to expel the irritant.

It's normal to get the occasional cough, but a persistent condition may indicate an irritation in the respiratory tract, caused by mucus, stomach acid, dust, perfume or even spicy food.

The lungs could be dysfunctional, although it could appear in disorders of other organs. TCM looks at the characteristics of a cough, sputum and

other symptoms to identify a pattern before prescribing suitable remedies.

For coughs caused by the common cold and flu, the medication is aimed at clearing the disease-causing elements from the airways, and promoting lung function. If you have clear, watery sputum with an itchy throat and a chill, warm herbs can help. For yellowish, sticky sputum with a sore throat and fever, cool herbs may be preferred. A dry cough with a dry nose and chapped lips needs lubricating herbs.

They're not suitable for a chronic cough caused by smoking, asthma or other problems. Improper use of cough depressants will make it worse.

A chronic cough usually involves impairment of the internal organs so it's important to note the other symptoms.

A cough with a coarse breathing sound, profuse yellowish, foul-smelling sputum, chest pain and fever may indicate a lung abscess. Coughs that follow meals, with lots of white sputum, fatigue and a stomach upset indicate the spleen and stomach have been affected.

Coughs aggravated by emotional outbreaks, sighing, a dry mouth and yellowish urine indicate the liver and lungs are infected. A cough after traumatic injuries, with a dull chest pain and sleeping difficulties, points to blood stasis in the chest. A weak cough with shortness of breath, a pale complexion and fatigue

would mean the lungs are under-functioning. A dry cough with a feverish sensation in the afternoon, night sweats, hoarseness and thirst is a sign the lungs lack nourishment. Lung and kidney dysfunctions can lead to coughing and wheezing, foaming sputum and a dull complexion. In rare cases, coughs can occur alongside incontinence and are called "bladder coughs". Those that occur with the passing of gas or bowel incontinence are called "intestinal coughs".

Generally, TCM cough remedies don't merely relieve the symptoms, they also promote the healing of primary health problems.

The body's surface is the first barrier against external

disease-causing factors. TCM stresses strengthening the body's defences to ensure it's more adaptable to environmental changes as well as preventing a recurrence of a cough.

Those with a weak body surface tend to sweat easily. They are advised to take a tonic called Jade Windscreen Powder (Yu Ping Feng San) for prevention. Patients should pay attention to what they eat: those with dry coughs should avoid deep-fried and spicy foods, and those with productive coughs should avoid frozen, raw and greasy foods.

Rose Tse and Jenny Eagleton are with Integrated Chinese Medicine Holdings (icm.com.hk). Before taking any medicine, consult your TCM or medical practitioner.